

St Matthew's Newcastle

# The Song of Mary

*Sermon for the Dormition of the BVM 2011*

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A lecture has been defined as a means of transferring information from the notes of the lecturer to the notes of the students without it passing through the minds of any of them. Something similar could be said of the recitation of well-known liturgical texts - such as the Magnificat.

As my training incumbent used to observe quite frequently, the Song of Mary is sentiment of revolution quite at odds with the genteel gatherings in which it is usually heard. The proclamation of the overthrowing of the mighty and the raising up of the lowly is the aspiration of every downtrodden people. Some, certainly those with a long and cyclical view of history, might suggest that it is a truism, since, in the end, every regime falls in the end: though it is not clear that the fallen mighty are inevitably replaced with the lowly.

Mary is, we believe, one instance - indeed, the preeminent example - of where this has, in fact, occurred. The simple peasant girl, chosen by God to bear His Son into the world, is raised to the highest favour in Heaven - and there is no greater status than that.

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However, it is not merely in terms of economic and social status that Our Lady's fortune is notable. Whatever the truth we now know, to the eyes of

the world, Mary was a young woman who fell pregnant before she was married, and whose Son stirred up unrest and was convicted of being a common criminal. Were she not Mary and were her Son not Jesus, I wonder how many of those around whom the words and music of the Magnificat regularly swirl, would respond to these two people.

There is a temptation amongst those who deal in ethical projects, as it were to become morally mighty. Editing the Gospel truths in a particular and congenial fashion, they create a value system, which presents themselves as virtuous; and from the platform of righteous superiority, which they have constructed for their comfort, they look down on those who fail to live up to the expectations against which their opinions judge others.

Just as Mary stands on the same side of the divide between humanity and divinity as us, so we all stand on the same side of the divide between sin and redemption. All of us have a tendency to sin and the triumph of that tendency in our lives - whether we recognise it or not. Often, it is circumstances rather than character, which determine whether or not we fall prey to our temptations.

This does not mean that we abandon the attempt to discern the Will of God and uphold it in our society and Christian communities - far from it. The salvation of souls through repentance and conversion of life is the substance of Christian discipleship. However, we need to recognise that our ethical discussions are not just about how other people lead their lives and judgements on their shortcomings. They are also about us; and if we cannot find anything to contemplate that touches on weaknesses in our own character and conduct, we are missing something.

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Just before the Magnificat tells us that the mighty will be pulled from their thrones,

it tells us, in the translation of the Book of Common Prayer, that by the power of His arm, God has routed the proud in the imagination of their hearts - those who imagine themselves better than they are. Mary's exaltation is testament to all this.

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